Should fine art come with a warning label?

Artists exposed to toxic chemicals. Many now take the risk seriously

article on **TORONTO STAR** posted on Oct. 9, 2004

[...An] **Ontario College of Art and Design** student had been a touch cavalier with a bottle of nitric acid in the etching studio, and had spilled a good amount of it over her legs and shoes.

[...]She was rinsed off, rushed to the hospital and treated for third-degree burns. The student was okay, but never returned to art school.

"I tell that story to every new printmaking class," says [Professor Rudolf] Bikers. "It gets them **thinking about safety in the studio**."

Though we tend to think of workplace safety as something that applies to industrial environments such as construction sites and factories, the artist ,too, faces an alarming number of occupational hazards.

While most of the pitfalls aren't as cataclysmic as the case of Bikkers and the disrobed pupil, a lifelong exposure to the chemicals, heavy metals, fumes and particulate associated with many forms of art-making can spell serious health problems - especially when safety precautions are ignored.

[...] Hobbyists are at risk too, as they are least likely to take precautions when it comes to producing art and could be affecting the health of their families.

Ted Rickard, **OCAD**'s manager of health and safety, says the hazards facing artists are insidious in their slow reveal. "The risks for artists are a lot more subtle than they are for other workers," says Rickard. "Artists tend to absorb the chemicals they use in small doses, which leads to chronic, low-level poisoning." [...] "The biggest problem for artists is the air pollution they create," says Rickard, who's been an expert in such matters for nearly 20 years now.

"For many artists, the challenge is getting fresh air to the nose."

Unfortunately, many artists don't start taking the risks involved with their craft seriously until later in life. That was the case for Jennifer Dickson, who damaged her lungs by working with large-format photo etchings in the '60s and '70s.

"I can remember standing over acid baths watching nice orange clouds coming off," she recalls.

Dickson, a retired professor and celebrated printmaker, says she nearly died from respiratory problems in the early '70s. She considers it a miracle that her son was born healthy despite exposure to harsh chemicals during the pregnancy.

"I had no one to blame but myself for my own stupidity and ignorance," she said. **"A lot of artists became ill because they weren't working in a safe way. But there's no excuse for it now."**

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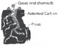

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